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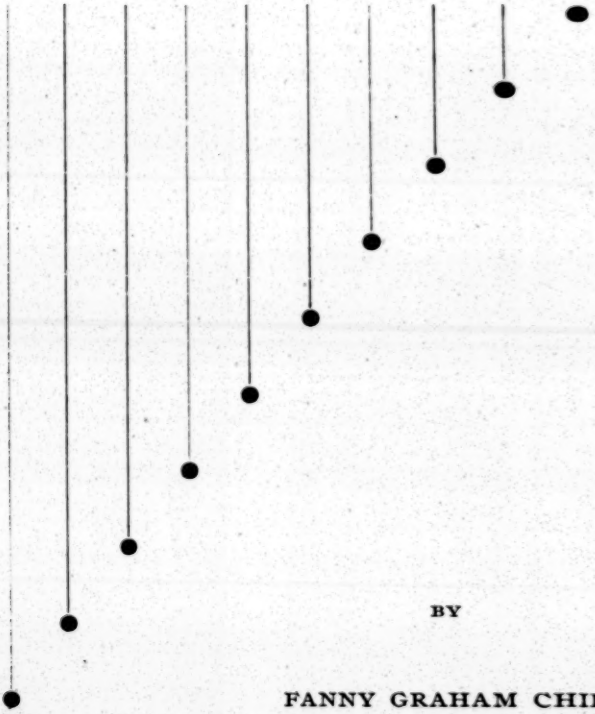
The Story of the . . .

Southern Ute Mission



BY

FANNY GRAHAM CHILDS

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Story of the Southern Ute Mission

FANNY GRAHAM CHILDS.

In the summer of 1888, three gentlemen were appointed by the President of the United States as a commission to visit the Southern Utes, a tribe of pure-blooded blanket Indians, in the south-western part of Colorado.

One member of the commission was a clergyman, who was naturally greatly interested in the spiritual condition of this tribe, as no missionary or Christian teacher had ever been among them. A Roman Catholic priest living in Durango, the nearest town, said, "It is impossible to Christianize those Indians."

One Sabbath, finding that an Indian named Joe who had been for a short time at the Teller Government School at Grand Junction, Colorado, was available as an interpreter, the minister held for them the first religious service they had ever had. The love of God was told to them in the simplest way, and the eager attitudes of these poor darkened souls, as their massive forms bent forward to understand Joe's version of

what was said, showed that something was greatly interesting them. This was the only time an interpreter could be found, and when the Indians came for "more talk" the next Sabbath it was a great disappointment to be unable to gratify them, but as they pressed around the door Dr. C—— and his wife kept them interested by showing them pictures and talking as best they could with a little English helped on by signs. Little did they dream that to-day one of those young men, splendid looking fellows in their holiday paint and feathers, would be preparing himself to preach the gospel to his own people.

As an illustration of the condition in which the Indians were at this time, two or three facts may be stated.

Ration day, when they came in for their weekly rations, was always marked by scenes of gambling, both by the men and the women, but there was no quarreling. They were never dangerous except when under the influence of liquor, which they could then procure only through the violation of the law by white men. One night, when they had in some way obtained a supply of liquor, they became so wild and violent that the commissioners were warned by a sober Indian that their lives were in danger.

There were times of special carousal. One of these, the dog dance, was held while the commissioners were there. In this dance the Indians would gather around a fire over which a huge pot was suspended into which a dog that had been killed for the purpose was thrown and cooked. Dancing around this the Indians would, from time to time, with a long stick or fork,

help themselves to portions, inviting the commissioners to share their hospitality, an invitation that was courteously declined.

Belief in witchcraft prevailed. Some time after the commissioners left, one of the most promising and intelligent young men, one of those who showed so much interest in the pictures, was killed in a terrible manner because he was accused of bewitching a sick child. He was taken by three of the tribe, including one of the chiefs, his throat cut and his body thrown into the Pine river.

Dr. C—— talked with clergymen in Durango, in an effort to see if some missionary work could not be done for these apparently hopeless ones. They were willing to help, but their hands were tied by their own work and by the want of necessary means.

Upon his return to Washington Dr. C—— gave an account of the condition and needs of these people, at the Church of the Covenant in that city, and Mrs. C—— did the same at the Ladies' Missionary Society. Interest was awakened. Correspondence with the Board of Home Missions and with Rev. F. M. Gilchrist, missionary in Colorado, and Rev. G. W. Pollock of Durango, followed, but again for want of means the Board felt that it could do nothing. In the fall of 1891, at the suggestion of Mr. Gilchrist and Mr. Pollock, Mr. A. J. Rodriguez, a Mexican and a convert of one of the mission schools, was sent to the Reservation to begin evangelistic work. Going from one tepee to another, reading the Bible and talking with the Indians in Spanish, which is generally understood

by them, trying to overcome their distrust by showing himself their friend, Mr. Rodriguez went quietly on with his work.

The expenses for that first winter, which were for traveling, were paid by the Woman's Presbyterian Society of Washington City.

In the fall of 1892, at the annual meeting of the Woman's Synodical Society of Baltimore, held in Baltimore, Md., a paper prepared by Mrs. C——, urging that the work be made permanent, was read; and with the endorsement of the Woman's Executive Committee and the approval of the Board of Home Missions, the support of Mr. Rodriguez, as an evangelist, was undertaken. This arrangement has been continued without interruption to the present time.

Preaching services were soon held at the Reservation. At first only a few Indians attended but they were beginning to ask if the words of the Book were true. One old chief, desiring to hear the Bible read, would ask, "What does God say?" A lame Indian would call Mr. Rodriguez to his tepee every time he passed to read and talk with him concerning religion. The work was slow and often discouraging, but Mr. Rodriguez was faithful. Rev. Dr. Kirkwood, Synodical Missionary of Colorado, Mr. Gilchrist and Mr. Pollock spoke most highly of Mr. Rodriguez and gave great help and encouragement.

Mr. Rodriguez' reports were written in Spanish and the literal translations often give a quaint wording to his expressions. In one of his first reports he says, "All are very ignorant on the subject of religion. A

chief said to me and Brother Gilchrist that we were lying, that we could not talk about 'Tata Dios' (Father God) because we wore beards, that he had seen 'empagre' (a priest) in Abequiese with pretty clothing and a pretty face without a beard, that talked to Tata Dios in a big house."

Soon after he wrote, "Some of the young Indians are much interested in the songs and can now sing two songs themselves." Again, "Many of the Indians, when I spoke to them about religion, they talked to me about gambling with them. The condition of the Indians is too sad, on account of their ignorance and the many vices that they have. There is only one Indian who is very much interested in the services."

In the summer of 1894 Mr. Rodriguez and his family moved to the Reservation to live. In August he wrote, "I have had some interesting conversations with chief Ignacio. One day I called on him and after we had had a little conversation he asked me if I could give him tobacco. I told him I did not use it. Then he said that I was the first Mexican he had seen that did not use tobacco. I told him that Christians ought not to smoke nor play cards nor drink whiskey. Then he said that I was a fool, that last year he went to the city of Washington and there he had seen all the big men smoking and drinking whiskey, and in other cities playing cards, and that he himself had seen the Book of God, and that God had made tobacco, whiskey, and cards, and had commanded to use them and therefore the big men of Washington use these things, and not only there but also everywhere, even the

priests who say mass; that I was very fool. I told him that tobacco would hurt our health, cards will rob a man of his money, and whiskey will make them quarrelsome and fighters. Whenever they are drunk they fight with all men, and if they can not find a man to fight with, they fight their own wives.

"He answered and said all these things were very good, that man was made to fight, woman to work, and the man can punish his wife whenever he sees fit."

After much more conversation Ignacio acknowledged that although he had been told that Mr. Rodriguez was a liar and did not know anything about God and had not a good suit, and did have a long beard, yet he had not seen any bad habits or deeds in him.

"Until this time no women had attended the services, but now some are beginning to come." Again he wrote, "I had another conversation with Buckskin Charlie. This man has a good idea of the existence of a God, and knows something about the flood, etc. He says that his great-grand-father used to tell them that the older people (their forefathers) used to say that there was a time when the whole world was destroyed by water and only one man and his wife escaped in a launch. The rain was so heavy that every mountain was covered with the exception of one, and that one is Montezuma's mountain, and the launch rested on the top of this mountain, and that there escaped no more animals than those that were on that mountain, such as deer, buffaloes, cows, horses, and some others, and from this man and woman descends the human race. Charles is a great thinker and conducts his ranch

affairs with great skill. He talks very little, but when he speaks he speaks with formality and treats of important business. I worked hard to make him my friend. He never would talk with me until I presented him one of my best suits of clothes and since then he is one of my confident friends. He comes to my house frequently and attends services whenever he is on the Reservation on Sabbath.

"My friend Aguilla says that his father used to tell him that he, Aguilla, was born at El Rio (Colorado), Taos County, New Mexico, and that he had been baptized when a child by a priest. He lived for some time among the Mexican people, but soon afterward he left that country and came to live with the Utes, and consequently he has lost his baptism. He thinks that he ought to be baptized with water again. I have told him that I will teach him all the duties of a Christian, and at the time when he may know and understand everything, then I will send for a minister who will be willing to baptize him."

Later in the same year Mr. Rodriguez wrote of four Indians who came frequently to services. One of them, Fillipe, used to be a captive among the Mexicans. He speaks Spanish fluently and has manifested a great deal of interest in the Word of God, and in knowing more. In a talk with an old man of eighty or more, named Picariche, Mr. Rodriguez asked him what he knew about the creation of the world. The old man replied that the first two creatures were the wolf and the coyote. The wolf was living in a great mountain covered with different kinds of timber. One day the

wolf began to break small pieces of timber, two of each kind, until he had a great many. Afterwards he placed them in a sack and placed the sack in one corner of his hut. One day the coyote came to visit the wolf at his cave and when he saw the bundle the coyote asked the wolf what was in it. The coyote went and did empty the sack and behold from every two sticks came out one man and one woman, and from every kind of timber came out one nation, tribe, and tongue, and that was the beginning of all tribes in the world. The tribes were scattered all over the world. The coyote told these tribes that they had to maintain war, one nation with the other, with the exception of some with whom they would be friendly; and more particularly the coyote told the Utes that they had to carry on war with the Sariches and the Comanches (two Indian tribes) and ordered them never to be friendly with these tribes, and if they would kill many of their enemies, not only would they be chiefs in this world, but they would be captains in the other world.

"I asked him if he knew where the other world was. He said that the coyote had said that this world would come to an end, but another world would take its place, where all warriors would live forever but the cowards would not live. 'Therefore,' he said, 'the custom of killing the best horses and depositing the best firearms in the graves of those who die.' I asked him to whom they would give an account. He said, 'To the Great Spirit of war.' Thus they had been told by the coyote. I have heard some of them say that the coyote can foretell by its bark the happenings of the

weather."

February 17th, 1895, Piche, one of the Indian police, died very suddenly up on a mountain where he was herding his flock. Mr. Rodriguez says of him, "My friend Piche was very honest in his life, and was a lover of work and education. When I arrived at the place where he died, his relatives had already wrapped the body with blankets and were ready to throw it far into the mountains, as is the custom, and everything belonging to him was gathered in a heap in order to burn them." Mr. Rodriguez persuaded them to have a Christian burial. Fifty Indians were present at the funeral. He spoke in a way that evidently touched their hearts, for he adds, "When I had finished there was not a single face that had not water on their eyes, and I do believe that this was a providence of God to open a door to the word, for it seems that the Indians from that time on have taken a deeper interest in the services, and I think they will not throw away their bodies any more."

In April, 1895, at a meeting of the Presbytery of Pueblo held at Del Norte, Mr. Rodriguez presented a petition for the organization of a church for both Indians and Mexicans. This was signed by fourteen persons, among them two Indians. The petition was granted and in June the little church was organized with ten members and called Emmanuel Church, eight Mexicans and two Indians were admitted.

An item of great interest in the next report is this. "Contributions from Emmanuel Church for Foreign Missions, $2.35." Soon after we notice regular con-

tributions taken for the Boards of the Church. This summer Mr. Rodriguez writes, "An Indian told me that he thought the sun is the great father who made all things and the stars are the little gods. He said that the 'Pujacontes' (medicine men) have to select one of the stars for their helper or god in making cures, but if the medicine man had not sufficient faith in his selected star when he is effecting cures he falls into a kind of ecstasy and in that way or state goes to the stars and his star tells him where the sick parts are and also tells him whether or not he is going to succeed in curing the case. They claim that these selected stars can show the medicine men the interior of the human body so they may see exactly where the sicknesses are. Many wonder when I tell them about the miracles effected by Christ, and usually they ask me if this Christ is a son of the sun or the moon. I explain to them in simple words how the Son of God came to the world and why He came, and also the great love God has for them and for all nations."

In 1895 the Indians began to plead for a school on the Reservation.

In November, 1896, Mr. Rodriguez' daughter-in-law, and later his daughter, held a little school with good results. The women often crowded around Mrs. Rodriguez and came to her house for instruction in household matters. Mrs. Rodriguez has since passed away after a long and painful illness.

Another Indian, Julian Buck, son of Buckskin Charlie, was received into the church, and an Indian girl

was baptized.

Contributions to the different Boards amounted to $12.75. In this report Mr. Rodriguez says, "Our brother, Julian Buck, gives promise of a good member. He is a regular attendant at Sunday School and at all services, and through him other Indians are attracted to the services. He talks a great deal with his people about education and Christianity, being the only Indian who can read." This young man was enrolled as a pupil in the training and industrial school for Indian boys and girls at Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1886-7, and was the only Ute ever in attendance there. He showed but little interest in Bible study and seemed wholly indifferent to religion; but he learned the English language readily and was one of the brightest pupils in school. The conversion of this interesting man in after time only confirms the truth that "no word falls to the ground." The faithful work of consecrated teachers always meets with its reward.

The next report speaks of the great interest taken in the services by relatives of Julian Buck. "There are some of them who are not far from the Kingdom of Heaven. Julian is very hopeful and faithful. He says he would like to study for the ministry. The oldest son of Severo, another chief, comes every Sunday three miles to attend the church. Buckskin Charlie speaks of the change he has noted in his son Julian since he united with the church. He said that now all his (Julian's) customs are as the whites', and he has separated himself from all vices practiced before."

In December, 1897, Mr. Rodriguez wrote, "Another

particular joy in my heart is that Julian Buck has gone to the college of Del Norte to receive a Christian instruction. My hopes and my prayers to the Lord are that he may be placed in the position of a preacher, preaching to his own people." Julian paid most of his own expenses. The rest was sent by friends in Washington. In January following, two more Utes united with the church, both were sons of Buckskin Charlie, and Julian's infant child was baptized.

Dr. Kirkwood, who was at Ignacio at this time, wrote: "Charlie said to me, he had always told his boys that there were two roads, the one leading up to God, the God of all people—Indians, Mexicans and Americans—and the other to no good. He wanted them to take the first, and his heart was glad now that he saw them doing so. I said,'Charlie, if the way is good why not take it yourself?" Indian-like he entered at once upon other matters. He will not be left to himself and I earnestly hope that he may soon take that upward road."

Again comes a plea for a mission school, with a promise to build a school-house with a room for the teacher.

In the summer Julian returned to his home an enthusiastic Christian. The Indians were greatly interested when he spoke to them, they proudly telling of his "preaching" for two hours. It was not long to them for it was the first time that anyone had brought to them in their own tongue the good news of salvation.

In May three trustees were appointed to consider the building of a chapel-school-house. It was decided to

begin on June sixth. No help was asked for the building, but this request came: "I trust that all the churches of our country will help us with their prayers asking the Lord for the development and advance in the civilization of these poor Indians who so much need the spiritual bread and the light of civilization."

The report for November, 1898, says, "Our house for a school and chapel has been completed. The brethren took an active part in building, and did show a great interest."

The whole cost, from the foundation to the blackboards, was $343.17. Of this amount only $58 came from persons outside of the congregation. All is free of debt and only a few little things remain to be bought. The school was opened and a teacher procured whose expenses were paid by the pupils, one dollar each per month. They were certainly doing what they could for themselves. November was appointed as a month of thanksgiving, and a thank offering was taken, but not for themselves. Already they have begun to send on the glad tidings and the offering of $23.85 was sent to the boards. Another collection was taken for the purchase of six lamps and five gallons of oil for lighting the little church. Is there not a suggestion here for some of us who, because we have built a parsonage, or bought a new carpet for the church parlor, or even built a new church, really could not contribute to the Woman's Board this year?

Does it mean that our Indians are more anxious than are we to send the gospel to every creature?

In January, 1899, the church was dedicated and

the chief, Severo, was ordained as a ruling elder. Mr. Rodriguez' last report in May says, "The churc is furnished with all the necessary furniture and fi tures except a bell." This is greatly needed. W hope that a bell will soon be ringing its joyous pea across the Reservation.

Early in 1899 seventeen were added to the church on confession of their faith in Christ. Dr. Kirkwood gives a most earnest commendation of what these people have done for themselves. A regular missionary teacher has been appointed by the Woman's Board and began her work September 1st, 1899.

In closing perhaps some extracts from a letter to Dr. C—— from Julian Buck may be of interest.

"Dear Friend:— Your most kind letter came to me a few days ago. I was very glad to hear from you. * * * I very much thank you for you send me the nice a little book, which I am interesting to read in it. It was reached me just day before the Christmas, and I like it very much and remember you the time that you speak to me at school-house. * * * Some of my people just commenced to receive the words of God, and try to be true and honest to God, and living true way and to be true light in their hearts, and to followed the Christ who is our Savior. The Lord be with you always."

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